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# Leading for Equity:

## Opportunities for State Education Chiefs

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## EQUITY MATTERS

Every student deserves an education that prepares him or her for lifelong learning, success in the world of work, and participation in representative government. Unfortunately, far too many students are not receiving the high-quality educational experiences needed to help them reach these goals. This not only hobbles their individual chances for success, but also undermines shared growth in an economy where most jobs that pay a living wage require some form of post-secondary education. Meaningful progress toward equity in education does not necessarily mean equal resources for all. Some students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are starting with less than their peers, and therefore require additional resources to achieve the same level of success. Educational equity means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income. State education chiefs are uniquely positioned to lead their state toward achieving educational equity. To do this, state chiefs must engage with diverse audiences across their state—families and communities, educators, policy makers, private-sector leaders, and faith communities—to forge a new commitment to educational equity.

Part of leading for equity means state leaders must rebuild trust that has been lost between the public and civic institutions, including public education. Many Americans have experienced inequity in education for generations. They have lost confidence that public officials are committed to ensuring that factors like race and socio-economic status do not determine students' success. Furthermore, there is a pervasive lack of awareness about the deeply disparate opportunities and outcomes that persist for low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. To regain trust and bridge this divide, state chiefs must publicly articulate specific, measurable commitments to advance equity, and empower stakeholders to hold the system accountable for delivering on those commitments. By making equity a priority, chiefs can contribute to improving our country and realizing the promise of public education.

Many educators, policymakers, and community leaders are advancing equity every day through their hard work and determination, often without much-needed support. Despite some progress, achievement and opportunity gaps persist at all levels of the educational system and education leaders can and must do more to advance equity.

### Educational equity

Educational equity means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income.

## DEFINING EQUITY

In an equitable education system, personal and social identifiers such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, and/or income are not obstacles to accessing educational opportunities; the circumstances children are born into do not predict their access to the resources and educational rigor necessary for success. Within such a system, all individuals attain sufficient knowledge and skills to pursue the college and career path of their choice and become active and contributing members of their communities.

Both inputs and outcomes must be considered when evaluating equity in education. Inputs such as distribution of funding, access to high-quality teachers, rigorous coursework, support services, supportive school climates, and extracurricular opportunities all play a role in contributing to educational equity. Outcomes such as achievement and attainment rates, graduation rates, suspension rates, access to social capital, post-secondary enrollment and completion, and access to well-paying careers are all measures of equity. Equity does not mean creating equal conditions for all students, but rather targeting resources based on individual students' needs and circumstances, which includes providing differentiated funding and supports and respecting students' voice and agency. Targeting supports in this way is intended to remove barriers and create the same opportunities for low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities that their more advantaged peers experience.

Although federal, state, and local educational systems play an important role in monitoring, promoting, and ensuring equity in education, individuals and communities must also have agency to authentically inform and influence public education to create and maintain true equity.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

These ten commitments are actions state chiefs can take to create a more equitable education system in their state. It is not feasible or realistic for any SEA to implement all ten of these commitments at once. Instead, we encourage state chiefs and their leadership teams to use the ten commitments to identify the most pressing concerns and greatest opportunities in their state and create an equity plan that allows their efforts toward educational equity to be monitored, modified, and measured. Within each of the broad categories are specific actions chiefs can take to advance equitable outcomes, guide conversations, and think more holistically to improve equity at scale in their states. This framework does not catalog every opportunity to advance equity, but highlights those on which state leaders can focus their efforts. In many cases, states already have policies in place to advance equity, especially as states transition to the Every Student Succeeds Act; the ten commitments can supplement these efforts. Once state chiefs and their leadership teams have selected commitments they plan to implement, they can visit [www.ccsso.org/EquityResources](http://www.ccsso.org/EquityResources) for a Resource Appendix with research, tools, and partners that can support their work.

## **TAKING A STAND FOR EQUITY**

State chiefs play a central role in advancing educational equity for all students and committing to transformation for the most disadvantaged students. The following ten commitments are actions state chiefs and their state education agencies (SEAs) can take to improve educational equity. SEAs should also consider using federal funding and flexibility granted by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)<sup>1</sup> to strengthen state efforts.

- 1. Prioritize Equity: Set and Communicate an Equity Vision and Measurable Targets**
- 2. Start from Within: Focus on the State Education Agency**
- 3. Measure What Matters: Create Accountability for Equity**
- 4. Go Local: Engage Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and Provide Tailored and Differentiated Support**
- 5. Follow the Money: Allocate Resources to Achieve Fiscal Equity**
- 6. Start Early: Invest in the Youngest Learners**
- 7. Engage More Deeply: Monitor Equitable Implementation of Standards and Assessments**
- 8. Value People: Focus on Teachers and Leaders**
- 9. Improve Conditions for Learning: Focus on School Culture, Climate, and Social-emotional Development**
- 10. Empower Student Options: Ensure Families Have Access to High-quality Educational Options That Align to Community Needs**

## **1. Prioritize Equity: Set and Communicate an Equity Vision and Measurable Targets**

As the highest-ranking education official in the state, chief state school officers have committed to prioritize the equity mission of public education. As part of setting the strategic vision and plan for the state's education system – and in collaboration with state boards of education, state legislatures, and governors – chiefs and their teams must analyze data to determine the greatest gaps and equity challenges and determine how they will focus efforts and allocate limited resources to address those gaps and their root causes. The chief is uniquely positioned to create urgency, galvanize state action, and instill optimism in educators and other stakeholders that significant progress can be accomplished through their collective efforts. This requires trade-offs, clear communication, and a call to stakeholders at all levels of the system to prioritize this work.

Specific state actions include:

**The chief is uniquely positioned to create urgency, galvanize state action, and instill optimism in educators and other stakeholders that significant progress can be accomplished through their collective efforts.**

- a) Make the case that equity benefits everyone in society.** If education is treated as a zero-sum game in which some need to lose to provide greater opportunity for others, it will be difficult to create buy-in and maintain momentum for change. The benefits of greater equity in education extend to all; when inequity persists, it costs everyone in terms of lost opportunities for economic development, greater dependence on government supports, and fewer Americans ready to serve our country as leaders across sectors and in the military.<sup>2</sup> Chiefs can create more support for this agenda by emphasizing the connection between equitable outcomes in education and greater prosperity and security for all Americans.
- b) Proactively initiate and lead conversations about equity.** This may include publicly examining data on current performance and trends (including preschool, K-12, post-secondary achievement and attainment rates, and workforce participation), as well as opportunity gaps and disparities in funding and resource allocation. A diverse group of stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, district leaders, community leaders, parents, and students should be engaged in this process<sup>3</sup>.
- c) Ensure that data are clear, accurate, and accessible to key stakeholders, with a focus on parents, legislators, and the media.** In order to address deep-seated patterns of inadequate opportunity and build the will to advance equity, chiefs must have a clear understanding of current conditions. Many Americans are unaware of the extent to which uneven distribution of resources and opportunities within and across schools throughout our public education system exacerbates inequity<sup>4</sup>. Recognizing that data is essential for establishing baselines, setting goals, and supporting continuous improvement, SEAs should invest in data quality, and take actions including:

- Creating protocols for data reporting and establishing quality-assurance mechanisms to ensure reliable data.
  - Enabling data systems to report on students' progress after graduation, including post-secondary access and completion, formal apprenticeships, military participation, and remediation rates in order to create feedback loops for the K-12 system.
  - Disaggregating data in meaningful ways to identify disparities in opportunity and outcomes.
- d) Collect, disaggregate, analyze, and publicly share data on other indicators of long-term success.** These data may include earnings, health and well-being, housing, and employment. Data sets should be structured to illuminate the interplay between education and longer-term indicators of success. To achieve this, SEAs may need to build new partnerships with additional state agencies, non-profit organizations, foundations, policymakers, and the media.
- e) Partner with stakeholders and other state actors to create urgency, establish public commitments, and set ambitious and achievable goals for addressing inequities in the state.** Conversations about the biggest gaps and best opportunities to advance equity should inform equity-driven commitments and goals. By engaging leaders from the state board of education, governor's office, and the legislature, state chiefs can connect to a broader group of supporters.
- f) Assign state agency staff and allocate state agency funding to support data analysis and communications functions.** As part of this commitment to transparency and public reporting, state leaders should ensure that adequate data collection practices and technical infrastructure are in place; SEAs should be able to guarantee the quality of this information and ensure the timely reporting of data. SEAs may also need to consider the possible roles for external partners like universities, regional education centers, education advocacy groups, and civil rights organizations that can both add capacity and hold the state accountable for action.



- g) Once these commitments and goals have been established, chiefs should hold themselves and others in the state accountable for making progress, and celebrate success where it is achieved.** Chiefs should regularly check in with SEA staff on where they are achieving gains, where they are struggling, and where the chief can help make the goals a reality. State chiefs should also ensure their strategic communications plan includes frequent progress reports on goals. CCSSO is committed to providing a forum for chiefs to share progress, collaborate on best practices, and provide resources on equity.

## **2. Start from Within: Focus on the State Education Agency**

State education agencies (SEAs) can strategically reallocate funding and staff resources to further their mission of advancing equity. Historically, SEAs have been resourced to administer and monitor how the state spends federal and state education funds, and many SEAs are still structured with divisions that reflect these different funding streams.<sup>5</sup> While a complete reorganization is not necessary, state leaders should consider how current SEA structures contribute to existing inequities and/or create barriers to more effectively tackling educational equity. The authority of state chiefs and the agencies they oversee varies by state. Even with limited authority, state chiefs can better equip SEA staff to be leaders for educational equity.

Specific actions include:

**It is important to acknowledge the unique history and present manifestations of race and inequity in American society.**

- a) Lead conversations on the impact of poverty on education and advocate for the resources students and families need.** With one in five children living below the federal poverty line<sup>6</sup> and communities across the country dealing with entrenched intergenerational poverty, chiefs and their leadership teams must be prepared to discuss the effects of hunger, homelessness, housing insecurity, and/or lack of access to quality healthcare on the students they serve and the importance of providing these children with rich educational experiences regardless of their background. Chiefs have an important role to play in advocating for funding and resources for vulnerable students, and building partnerships to holistically address their needs. Chiefs should ensure that they do not conflate race with poverty or use poverty as a way to avoid more difficult conversations about race.
- b) Talk directly about issues of race and equity and prepare the senior leadership team to speak effectively and comfortably about race and racism.** As numerous sources of data on educational inequity prove, race still matters.<sup>7</sup> Even when other factors are accounted for, such as students' socioeconomic and disability status, there are serious and persistent racial gaps that can only be solved if doing so is a leadership priority. It is important to acknowledge the unique history and present manifestations of race and inequity in American society. Creating a space to discuss and address these issues is both difficult and essential, and requires courageous leadership. To convey the importance of this work, state chiefs should institute trainings for SEA staff on how to talk about race. Given the sensitivity of these issues, it is a necessary strategy to start these conversations internally with SEA staff before engaging external stakeholders in conversations that address issues of race and equity directly. SEA staff must understand the history of racial discrimination in public education and explore how their unconscious bias may allow these inequities to persist. These conversations might need expert facilitation particularly at the outset, and the chief should be present and engaged so that their staff knows these issues are a priority at the highest levels of leadership. While it is necessary to address issues of

race directly, race is not the only paradigm for addressing equity—in some states other equity issues may be more acute or urgent.

- c) **Make equity an agency-wide priority by setting equity-related goals within and across divisions that are tied to the state's broader goals and strategies.** Students growing up in poverty require additional resources, as do students with disabilities and English learners; a robust accountability system should elevate successes and challenges in meeting the needs of all students. Within the SEA, however, equity should be about more than closing achievement and opportunity gaps, though these are important measures to assess goals against. Additional equity-related goals can help the SEA as a whole—and each division within the agency—achieve their vision for equitable education statewide. For example, content or curriculum leaders at the SEA can set a goal of increasing the share of culturally-relevant curricula and books written by and depicting people of color

recommended for local districts to adopt; human resources can focus on recruiting and hiring diverse SEA staff; and human capital offices can strive to increase access to effective teachers and leaders for low-income students and students of color. SEA leaders

**Within the SEA, however, equity should be about more than closing achievement and opportunity gaps, though these are important measures to assess goals against**

should provide necessary resources, information, and support for division leaders to set and meet these goals and make them a priority in management routines to keep equity in focus across divisions. All SEA staff should be held responsible for advancing equity and should see it reflected in their own work.

- d) **Consider restructuring SEA roles to prioritize equity.** Some school systems have created a Chief Equity Officer position to oversee many of the types of actions described in this document and to keep the issue in the forefront. Some states and systems have an Office of Native American Education or Office of Hispanic Education, depending on their student population. These offices need to be staffed and funded adequately, have regular communication with the chief and senior SEA leaders, and have a clear charge and measurable goals. Chiefs should also ensure these offices do not operate in silos, but work together with other departments.
- e) **Diversify SEA staff.** State agencies should prioritize the recruitment and hiring of people who are representative of the student population in the state. In states with particularly significant racial achievement gaps, leaders should ensure that the staff tasked with addressing these gaps understand and represent the communities they are trying to serve. There are challenges to recruiting diverse talent, including the geography of state capitals, salary schedules, and the traditional profile of SEA employees. Chiefs must address these challenges creatively; they can start by reaching out to diverse education leaders and finding out what would incent them to help lead this work at the SEA.

f) **Target more SEA funding toward outreach and communications, with a focus on directly engaging low-income families and families of color and building partnerships with organizations that have closer ties to families and community leaders.** Chiefs and their leadership teams should build and sustain two-way lines of communication and feedback loops with the students and families they serve. To achieve this, chiefs can explore how different funding sources can be braided to facilitate these conversations and extend and build agency capacity. Representatives from these organizations and communities should be valued partners on all of the key tasks of improving the quality of education, not just related to equity. For example, chiefs could use federal funds for statewide family engagement centers, and use state communications and outreach funds to support research on best practices for building an infrastructure for communication and family engagement. This could include outreach training for SEA staff to ensure more SEA staff beyond the chief, public information officer, and a handful of other agency staff are prepared to engage with stakeholders. Communications from the SEA should be made available in the languages families speak and in formats accessible to students and adults with disabilities.

### **3. Measure What Matters: Create Accountability for Equity**

Designing and administering accountability systems is a core state responsibility with profound implications for equity. Accountability has multiple dimensions under state and federal law, including the design of school performance rating systems and oversight of evidence-based interventions in low-performing schools and schools with persistent and significant achievement gaps. In addition, ESSA requires greater transparency and public reporting so the public can hold system leaders accountable for equity. While there are both federally- and state-imposed timelines for the development and implementation of new statewide accountability systems, state leaders should not let an ESSA-compliance mentality drive their accountability design; instead, chiefs should consider their broader vision for the state education system and the state's equity goals. Specific actions include:

**ESSA requires greater transparency and public reporting so the public can hold system leaders accountable for equity.**

#### **a) Include measures of proficiency and progress and growth in the accountability system.**

While measures of academic proficiency, including average scale scores and proficiency indexes, are important for identifying achievement gaps, student growth is a more effective way to show improvement and progress over time. To fully tell the story of achievement and advancement, SEAs should include both types of measures in their accountability systems and shine a light on schools and systems with low achievement and low growth. SEAs should also measure academic achievement at multiple performance levels—such as basic, proficient, and advanced—so that all students matter, and not just the “bubble kids” near the proficiency line. This is particularly important for high-achieving, low-income students who are likely to be overlooked by a singular focus on proficiency.

- b) Set ambitious and achievable interim and long-term goals for English learners and ensure they are making adequate progress achieving English language proficiency.** Chiefs and stakeholders should clearly define the meaning of English language proficiency and ensure accountability systems include the measures needed to track progress toward and intervene when states and districts are off-track. The chief should also determine who can hold the SEA accountable for meeting its goals. SEAs and LEAs must integrate English language learning into broader curriculum and instruction, professional learning, teacher preparation, and recruitment efforts.
- c) Collect data and report on school climate.** ESSA's accountability provisions include a new indicator for school quality or student success, such as chronic absenteeism, student engagement, postsecondary readiness, or school climate and safety. Chiefs can explore how to report these indicators of equity to the public when formal accountability measures are unavailable.
- d) Analyze and publicly report rates of identification for special education services.** SEAs can monitor trends in identifying students with disabilities, including over-identification and under-identification of students of color, English learners, or low-income students and intervene if groups of students are being systemically over- or underrepresented. SEAs can use these data to work with LEAs and schools to determine the reasons for disproportionate identification and consider additional resources or training to reverse these trends. SEAs can also play a role when students are being underserved or not receiving high-quality supplemental services based on their needs. Professional development and training for SEA, district, and school staff involved in identifying and supporting students with disabilities should include explicit conversations about race, bias, and appropriate identification and services for students.
- e) Ensure the accountability system is relevant and meaningful to parents, students, and other stakeholders.** SEAs should engage representatives from low-income communities and communities of color in the design, reporting, and refinement of accountability measures. It is especially important to build partnerships and maintain open lines of communication with district and community leaders when intervening in low-performing schools.
- f) Partner with LEAs to ensure school improvement efforts are targeted to community needs and strengths.** Catalog and leverage the assets of each school as part of the school improvement strategy. For example, school improvement planning templates should



include community engagement and contributions that can be made by local leaders, community-based organizations, and corporate partners. Community-based organizations and service providers can also be leveraged to provide additional expertise, capacity, and support for schools and students.

#### **4. Go Local: Engage Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and Provide Tailored and Differentiated Support**

Education is largely a local enterprise, with local education agencies (LEAs)—districts, charters, or charter management organizations—leading education strategy, administration, and resource allocation. While governance structures and authority vary by state, state education leaders can provide guidance, support, funding, public pressure, and incentives to help LEAs close achievement and opportunity gaps based on local context. Accountability, monitoring, compliance, and oversight will always be necessary state (and federal) functions, but state leaders should take the lead to find common ground with local superintendents, local school board members, and other leaders to make sure all actors recognize their power and responsibility to advance equity. Closing opportunity and achievement gaps can only happen if state and local leaders understand and embrace their respective roles. Specific actions include:

**To be sustainable, the effort to combat inequity should be locally-owned.**

- a) Convene and build an ongoing dialogue with local leaders who hold different roles and perspectives on how to learn about promising practices and design new approaches to address inequity.** To be sustainable, the effort to combat inequity should be locally-owned. Chiefs should make equity considerations a prominent feature of site visits and community meetings. Chiefs and their teams can feature data on issues of inequity to ensure prioritization.
- b) Provide targeted supports and guidance to districts to help teachers and leaders build and sustain excellent schools.** SEAs should consider how to build a network of school and district leaders working in similar contexts to provide them with resources and thought partnership. This may include addressing classroom management challenges, preparing educators to teach and lead in high-poverty schools, recruiting and retaining highly-effective educators in hard-to-staff schools, and/or provide technical assistance to help districts examine their human capital data to identify trends and gaps.
- c) Encourage LEAs to explore and select culturally-relevant instructional materials and pedagogy that is aligned to state standards.<sup>8</sup>** In states with high populations of certain student groups, state leaders may vet and provide these resources and consider accompanying cross-walks or alignment guides to ease the burden on districts. States could also consider how to incentivize the use of culturally-relevant materials for recipients of School Improvement Grants.

- d) **Highlight promising local practices for equity.** SEAs can surface bright spots from LEAs or local community groups and help others in the state understand what it took to generate those results. Chiefs and their leadership should consider interactive ways to engage stakeholders and other members of the public in these discussions; they can lead “equity walks” showing progress, results, and how to sustain and build on successes.
- e) **Require or incentivize participation in and funding for high-quality trainings that address the needs of the whole child.** This can include restorative justice techniques (alternative disciplinary practices that value conflict resolution and mediation over exclusionary disciplinary practices),<sup>9</sup> cultural competency, positive behavior supports, identifying and addressing mental health needs, family outreach, or other priority areas identified by local needs assessments. These opportunities should be targeted to LEAs with the most acute needs. SEAs should also consider where these competencies can be incorporated into educator preparation program coursework and licensure and recertification requirements. SEAs should not attempt to provide these trainings themselves, but instead should vet the effectiveness of potential providers and supply schools and districts with a menu of high-quality options.
- f) **Provide grants for innovative, local programs targeted at specific disadvantaged groups of students.** Programs targeted at specific subgroups have been shown to improve student engagement and academic achievement.<sup>10</sup> SEAs should use state and district data to identify the right groups on which to focus these efforts.

## 5. Follow the Money: Allocate Resources to Achieve Fiscal Equity

Funding for public education is a foundational state responsibility. Over the last several decades, many states have increased their share of public education funding, minimizing reliance on local funds that are distributed unevenly and exacerbate inequality.<sup>11</sup> In some states, funding has become more equitable in recent years, but states and districts still often invest less in educating low-income students and students of color than they do in educating affluent and white students.<sup>12</sup> These funding gaps occur across districts, at different schools within the same district, and even within the same school.<sup>13</sup> Specific actions include:

**State leaders should commit to advocating for fiscal equity, and use their political influence and authority to allocate resources for closing opportunity gaps.**

- a) **Advocate for equitable and adequate funding.** State leaders should commit to advocating for fiscal equity, and use their political influence and authority to allocate resources for closing opportunity gaps. Funding and allocation formulas are usually determined through a political process, in which chiefs can engage with governors, state boards, and legislators (including members of the education committees and/or

budget/finance committees) to provide leadership, information, and data to improve resource equity. Chiefs can also lead conversations about and build political will for weighted student funding formulas, making the case for how these formulas will advance equity, improve student outcomes, and serve the state's overall educational goals. This includes ensuring that high-quality charter schools also receive sufficient funding, if applicable.

- b) Offer fiscal guidance for LEAs on how to invest in high-leverage supports which are more likely to contribute to student academic success.** State leaders should provide assistance to local leaders, including superintendents, Chief Academic Officers, Chief Financial Officers and local school board members in determining how best to allocate dollars to meet equity goals. This will likely require trade-offs. For example, funding programs for disadvantaged students may require hiring fewer school officers/security

guards, whose benefits are outweighed by a negative influence on school culture and equity, and disproportionate consequences for students of color<sup>14</sup>, and instead dedicate those resources toward hiring school counselors, mental and behavioral health workers, and nurses.

**State chiefs should reach out to county and state departments of public health, workforce development, and other providers of social services to ensure every possible available resource is utilized to help disadvantaged students succeed.**

- c) Monitor equitable distribution of local funds.** SEAs should ensure that low-income students and students of color have equitable access to, among other things:
- a. technology, including STEM courses and content and broadband access;
  - b. high-quality and safe facilities, including structurally-sound buildings, safe passages (crossing guards/crosswalks), science labs, functional heating and air-conditioning, and school cafeterias with kitchens if necessary; and
  - c. extra-curricular opportunities such as art, music, sports, and associated resources (instruments, playing fields, equipment, etc.).
- d) Prioritize coordination of public funding and services.** SEAs can combine funds from multiple sources for education as well as other services like health and nutrition, and leverage intergovernmental coordination to accomplish this. State chiefs should reach out to county and state departments of public health, workforce development, and other providers of social services to ensure every possible available resource is utilized to help disadvantaged students succeed. The chief and SEA staff can build partnerships at the state level and encourage them at the local level to facilitate this coordination. In addition, SEAs should provide support for LEAs, particularly in rural areas or in smaller districts, to partner to create economies of scale.

## **6. Start Early: Invest in the Youngest Learners**

Many low-income students and students of color are already academically behind their peers when they start kindergarten.<sup>15</sup> A developmentally-appropriate, high-quality early learning experience aligned to standards uses play to help prepare young children to learn. State chiefs can make the case that equity requires expanding and targeting access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs, and closing opportunity gaps for children growing up in low-income families; this is a critical strategy for improving the quality of K-12 education with a high return on investment.<sup>16</sup>

Specific actions may include:

**A developmentally-appropriate, high-quality early learning experience aligned to standards uses play to help prepare young children to learn.**

**a) Advocate for increased funding for more children to attend high-quality pre-K.**

Additional pre-K slots can be set aside specifically for:

- o low-income families (gradually increasing poverty eligibility levels);
- o three- and four-year old students zoned for under-performing K-12 schools;
- o dual language learners/English learners;
- o students in neighborhoods with a dearth of affordable slots, based on community mapping.

**b) Provide state funding, via formula or competitive grants, to improve the quality of publicly-funded pre-K programs tied to quality standards, and target areas with highest need.** With this funding, pre-K programs, districts, and schools offering pre-K can:

- o reduce staff-to-child ratios and lower class size;
- o increase salaries to accompany increased education/degree requirements for ECE teachers;
- o provide hearing, vision, and dental screenings and services;
- o extend the pre-K program day;
- o strengthen and foster school and family connections through additional programming; and
- o provide additional teacher professional development and training.

SEAs should monitor how increased funding helps recipients meet their goals related to expanding and improving high-quality pre-K programs, including allocating classroom slots to low-income students and English learners. SEAs can also provide information to grantees on best practices, technical assistance providers, and program evaluation.<sup>17</sup>

- c) Align pre-K/early learning standards to K-3 standards and provide professional development for pre-K and elementary school educators.** The transition from pre-K to elementary school is a critical time for young learners,<sup>18</sup> which SEAs can help facilitate. This can include engaging early childhood educators in developing and aligning education standards to guard against “push-down” of instructional practices that are not developmentally appropriate for young children. States can also ensure early learning standards cover multiple domains including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development, and partner with other state agencies if early learning programs are not housed within the SEA.
- d) Modify suspension or expulsion policies for children in early childhood education programs and primary grades.** SEAs should analyze data on trends in suspension and expulsion rates by race, income, and age and train early childhood educators on developmentally-appropriate behavioral interventions to ensure educators can manage their classrooms without resorting to exclusionary discipline practices. School discipline policies should account for student time spent outside of the classroom and seek to reintegrate students as quickly as possible. SEAs can determine the resources necessary for LEAs and schools to develop educators’ expertise on social-emotional development in the early grades, and emphasize how investments in this area could help reduce teachers’ dependence on exclusionary discipline practices for young children.
- e) Prioritize trainings and resources on cultural and linguistic services for the early grades.** In some communities, the pre-K population is far more diverse—culturally and linguistically—than the K-12 student population; certain communities are experiencing rapid levels of growth amongst their youngest learners and thus need more resources targeted to those students. States may also consider giving flexibility to LEAs to assess their own needs and utilize resources accordingly.
- f) Engage in partnerships with related state agencies or divisions to ensure alignment across all programs.** The SEA can coordinate with health and human service agencies to implement a home-visiting program or other ECE interventions, or work with the state library division on early literacy initiatives.

## **7. Engage More Deeply: Monitor Equitable Implementation of Standards and Assessments**

While most states are not directly responsible for running schools or hiring educators, they do have an important role to monitor and oversee local actions. However, what happens in classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds has the greatest impact on students; chiefs must ensure all students receive an equitable education without micromanaging or overextending themselves. Specific actions include:

**Improving the quality of curriculum and related instructional materials is a high-impact strategy for increasing student achievement and engagement.**

**a) Monitor district course offerings and screening practices to determine whether low-income students and students of color are being provided a college- and career-ready course of study.** Compelling evidence establishes that all students accelerate and deepen their learning through advanced courses, such as gifted and talented tracks, Advanced Placement® (AP), International Baccalaureate®, early college high school courses, college-prep courses, and dual enrollment in post-secondary courses.<sup>19</sup> Yet fears that these courses will be too hard for certain students beget persistent gate-keeping practices (e.g., GPA prerequisites, teacher recommendations).<sup>20</sup> SEAs can require districts to report when students are assigned to below-grade-level courses, and/or gifted and talented programs. When rigorous courses are offered, SEAs should monitor fidelity of implementation and provide resources and support as needed. SEAs can also provide guidance around universal screening practices that can better identify low-income students and students of color who are often underrepresented in advanced courses or gifted and talented tracks.<sup>21</sup>



**b) Remove financial barriers to college- and career-readiness.** This may include subsidizing AP course or test fees, offering universal and free PSAT, ACT, and/or SAT administrations, and/or providing support materials such as graphing calculators, test prep, or keyboarding skills for students taking computer-based assessments.

**c) Ensure that all students have access to high-quality instructional materials.** Improving the quality of curriculum and related instructional materials is a high-impact strategy for increasing student achievement and engagement, yet the quality of instructional materials varies greatly between classrooms and many misaligned materials are still in use.<sup>22</sup> Chiefs with state-adopted curriculum policies can play a central role in overseeing the quality of materials. Chiefs in local-adoption states may not have direct oversight, but they can provide guidance and resources on what constitutes high-quality instructional materials; this will demand some political will to ensure rigorous quality review. In addition to general quality and alignment, states can increase representation of diverse and culturally-sustaining materials in locally adopted curricula. As part of this strategy, SEAs can:

- a. Ensure that history, social studies, and civics curricula and instructional materials include accurate representations of the role of race in American history and governance; this is particularly important in states with state-adopted curriculum policies.
- b. Assist LEAs with strategies to monitor content of local curricula and instructional materials to prevent racial bias, and foster critical thinking by ensuring students encounter and examine diverse perspectives and world views.

- c. Provide guidance for the creation, alignment, and adoption of instructional materials for English learners and ensure these materials are high quality.<sup>23</sup>
- d. Provide guidance for LEAs, schools, and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams about including students with disabilities in advanced courses and giving students with the most significant cognitive disabilities access to grade-level content and support for completing a regular diploma.

**d) Check for bias in curriculum and assessment as part of state-level review of instructional materials, and assist LEAs in implementing strategies to detect bias in curriculum and assessment, particularly for locally-selected or designed materials.**

SEA staff can develop checklists or rubrics to help LEA staff and teachers ensure the validity of assessment items. They should be able to recognize if a test item includes culturally biased content, if a particular item produces large gaps along racial or socioeconomic lines, and whether curricular materials are culturally relevant. SEA staff can also connect LEA staff with resources and trainings to instill assessment-related practices that reduce bias.<sup>24</sup>

**e) Analyze the quality of assignments against rigorous standards and share learnings with LEAs.** To meet the demands of college- and career-ready standards, students need to be engaged in intellectually demanding work. Equity is undermined when some students

are assigned worksheets while other students work on rich tasks that demand critical thinking. Yet within and across schools and districts, the quality and rigor of classroom assignments can vary greatly.<sup>25</sup> SEAs can work with

To meet the demands of college- and career-ready standards, students need to be engaged in intellectually demanding work.

external support organizations to analyze assignment quality and identify gaps in the equitable implementation of standards and curricula.

**f) Align career and technical education (CTE) with industry needs and career-readiness standards, and link to industry-recognized credentials.** Chiefs and SEA staff can ensure that students have access to experienced faculty, updated technology and infrastructure, and a clear path to earn credentials that lead to successful post-secondary careers. SEA staff should monitor CTE enrollment patterns and prevent low-income and minority students from being relegated to low-level or low-wage CTE tracks. SEAs should also measure progress on expanding access to CTE pathways and credentials.

**g) Ensure students with disabilities and English learners have access to accommodations in instruction and assessment.** Critical to equity is the provision of accommodations for which students are eligible and appropriate support and training for educators so that students can make full use of those accommodations. Guidance should be provided to LEAs, schools, and IEP teams about ways to maximize the inclusion of students with disabilities and English learners in the general classroom and general assessments.

## **8. Value People: Focus on Teachers and Leaders**

In response to federal law, state chiefs have provided written assurance that low-income students and students of color will no longer be taught disproportionately by ineffective, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers. Each state has already developed a plan to meet this assurance, but these plans can be strengthened. Implementation must be supported and aggressively monitored to ensure equitable access to effective teaching, and teachers must be prepared to teach our increasingly diverse student population. State leaders should focus on hiring more diverse teachers, principals, and system leaders to reflect changing student demographics; while most students in our schools now are children of color, this is true for very few of our teachers and principals.<sup>26</sup> Specific actions include:

**States can work with LEAs to understand the data and provide resources or supports for improving teacher retention.**

- a) Determine where state equity plans have been successful, and celebrate this progress prominently to illustrate what is possible and to guide other systems.** Where progress has not been achieved, SEAs need to convene stakeholders and develop more effective approaches, collaborations, and incentives to advance equitable access to effective, experienced teachers.
- b) Annually report on multiple indicators of the diversity of the educator workforce, including teachers, principals, and district leadership.** SEAs should set goals for expanding educator workforce diversity (e.g., race, gender, etc.) and track diversity of new teachers by preparation program. SEAs can also analyze the extent to which the state's educator workforce reflects student demographics, and identify ways to be more intentional about recruiting and retaining a more representative workforce.
- c) Analyze and monitor teacher licensure requirements and create new programs to increase diversity in the teaching profession.** SEAs should monitor state licensure policies that may have a disproportionate impact on teacher candidates of color. Research shows there are tradeoffs in raising cut scores for teacher licensure exams and that scores on these exams are not necessarily predictive of performance in the classroom and student achievement.<sup>27</sup> Chiefs should regularly review the impact of licensure policies and examine whether a more selective program has the desired impact on the overall quality and diversity of the teacher corps. SEAs can invest in "grow your own" initiatives to develop paraprofessionals already working in the community or to build pathways to the profession for local high school students to increase the diversity of the teacher corps.
- d) Track and report on differential teacher retention and turnover rates.** SEAs should determine if any groups of teachers (identified by racial/ethnic group, or by the students they serve, etc.) have disproportionately high turnover rates. States can work with LEAs to understand the data and provide resources or supports for improving teacher retention.

- e) **Deliberately develop cultural competencies among aspiring and practicing educators so that educators are prepared to meet the needs of each student.**  
SEAs can partner with higher education/teacher preparation institutions and alternative-route programs to revamp teacher preparation programs with an eye toward advancing equity.
- f) **Initiate programs to ensure the school leadership pipeline prepares principals to lead in urban, rural, and other disadvantaged or hard-to-staff districts.** Programs should consider how to recruit and retain principals in these settings once they have completed their preparation, or how residency models can be used to recruit principals who are interested in leading schools in these communities. SEAs should also identify ways to develop teacher capacity in these contexts.
- g) **Provide necessary guidance, information, and funding to train educators in mental health supports and intervention strategies.** SEAs can explore ways to support this training especially for the schools and districts with the greatest need.
- h) **Provide funding for teacher training on restorative justice.** This should include funding both for in-service training on restorative justice/behavior management and school discipline, as well as incentives and programs to build this content into teacher preparation programs and certification requirements.

## 9. Improve Conditions for Learning: Focus on School Culture, Climate, and Social-emotional Development

Achieving equity means meeting the needs of every child, which includes providing a safe and supportive school environment, access to a well-rounded curriculum and appropriate technology, and regular examination of additional unmet needs. In addition to general culture and climate, there is a particular need to prioritize this work because students who are growing up in poverty are disproportionately exposed to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACE) that affect their readiness to learn.<sup>28</sup>

Schools and staff responsible for educating these students need training and resources to create a level playing field in which students can achieve to their potential. School Improvement Grant plans and allocations are one way for states to start addressing these needs. Chiefs should communicate proactively about the lessons learned when addressing students with multiple ACE factors.

Schools cannot and should not try to displace families or faith communities as sources of value and character development. However, schools must ensure students can learn in environments

**Schools must ensure students can learn in environments that are conducive to developing the skills, habits, and dispositions that support success in school and beyond.**

that are conducive to developing the skills, habits, and dispositions that support success in school and beyond. Without stifling local control or innovation, SEAs can elevate these issues and the crucial equity implications. Specific actions include:

**a) Measure and improve school culture as one important aspect of closing achievement gaps.**

Relational trust in schools is critical to improvement, but schools with high proportions of low-income students and students of color are more likely to have a counter-productive culture and climate.<sup>29</sup> Many states sponsor surveys that find a disparity in access to a healthy school culture, but too few have yet addressed these issues. SEAs should analyze survey results to help identify disparities in school culture and lead initiatives to address them. For example, surveys may cite ineffective school leadership as a contributing factor to a poor school culture, and the state may launch training or other supports to improve school leaders' competencies in this area.



**b) Work with LEAs to explore interventions to address chronic absenteeism.** Research shows that schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 15 or more school days during the academic year) have lower achievement in math and English language arts, lower ratings on school climate measures, and lower graduation rates.<sup>30</sup> Many states are considering this measure as their student success or school climate indicator under ESSA. Chiefs can identify promising practices to decrease the prevalence of chronic absenteeism and connect LEAs with high proportions of chronic absentees to targeted resources and supports.

**c) Create a common framework and vocabulary for addressing students' social-emotional development and academic mindsets, and establish outcomes, measures, and benchmarks for schools to pursue.** Research continues to mount that non-academic factors have profound impact on student learning, including students' sense of belonging; an atmosphere that encourages intellectual risk-taking and active student engagement; and students' beliefs about the relevance of schools and the efficacy of their efforts.<sup>31</sup>

**d) Consider how best to integrate social-emotional development measures into state reporting and accountability systems, while acknowledging limitations of current measurement strategies.** SEAs can use surveys to collect and analyze social-emotional development skills such as self-efficacy and time management, even if they are not using this data for high-stakes accountability decisions.

- e) Invest in principals' ability to lead schools that support the whole child.** Principals set the tone and have the greatest influence over the culture of a school, including whether all groups of students feel safe and valued.<sup>32</sup> SEAs should help LEAs connect principals with high-quality professional learning opportunities focused on building schools and supporting teachers to make social-emotional development a priority.
- f) Integrate analysis of teachers' ability to teach social-emotional competencies into licensure requirements and teaching frameworks.** Research suggests teachers have a differential impact on students' attendance, engagement, and behavior.<sup>33</sup> SEAs can help connect LEAs with effective coaches and professional development providers to ensure teachers can equip students with strong social-emotional competencies. Teacher evaluators should know how to coach teachers to improve all of the different facets of their practice, including how to support students' social-emotional development. SEAs could coordinate with local educator preparation programs to ensure these competencies are being integrated into the curricula.
- g) Revise exclusionary discipline policies and explore alternative strategies.** States should revisit zero tolerance policies, considering both the intended purpose of disciplinary practices like suspensions and expulsions for keeping schools safe and orderly as well as the devastating effects these policies can have on student outcomes.<sup>34</sup> To support schools and districts in exploring alternative behavior management strategies, SEAs should provide guidance, technical assistance, and funding to prioritize training on positive behavioral supports, including on restorative justice efforts. This support can be targeted to schools with the greatest need, as identified by analyses of school discipline data. SEAs should also ensure that teacher and leader preparation programs instill these competencies in candidates so they arrive on the job equipped to address behavior issues in positive, non-exclusionary, and non-discriminatory ways. States can also encourage discipline policies that capitalize on community support and wrap-around services that address the root causes of chronic misbehavior. Chiefs should lead a conversation about how states, districts, and schools play a role in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline and make the case for why schools should adopt disciplinary policies that create safe schools without jeopardizing students' life chances.
- h) Advocate for the state to direct additional funding and technical assistance toward mental and physical health services to schools with the greatest need.** Chiefs can advocate for these resources where they are most needed, and also



explore other cost-saving or sharing options like creating economies of scale or local partnerships. These resources should include professional development for teachers and school leaders on mental and physical health and funding for school counselors, nurses, and other staff who can address students' non-academic needs. Chiefs can also create or strengthen partnerships with state health and human services and mental health departments to connect students with services provided by those agencies.

- i) **Provide incentives, competitive grants, or guidance to LEAs and local communities to design and offer school-based comprehensive services—such as community schools—to low-income communities and communities of color.** State leaders can help broker relationships with state-level nonprofit providers of social services and/or procure social services at the state level to facilitate local delivery (i.e., health services, out-of-school programs, nutrition programs, parent education programs). State leaders can also advocate for additional funding and provide grants, technical assistance, or guidance for LEAs and districts to offer extended learning time.

## 10. Empower Student Options: Ensure Families Have Access to High-quality Educational Options That Align to Community Needs

Student and parent agency is an important part of achieving educational equity. All students, regardless of their background, should have options regarding how and where they go to school, taking into account the needs of local communities.

- a) **Streamline open enrollment policies across districts and across schools within the same district.** A common enrollment process can allow families to fill out a single application with a single deadline for any and all schools they wish to apply to, including schools within the district and charter schools. This integrates and clarifies the selection process so that parents can choose from the full range of options and make informed choices.<sup>35</sup>
- b) **Incentivize inter-district choice programs that create more diverse schools.** Just as communities have become increasingly racially and socioeconomically isolated, so have public schools.<sup>36</sup> Research shows that achievement gaps are smaller in diverse schools and that learning alongside students from different backgrounds can help all students develop stronger critical thinking and problem-solving skills.<sup>37</sup> Chiefs should examine instances where LEAs are close in proximity but starkly divergent in their students' racial and socioeconomic makeup, and explore opportunities to promote cross-district enrollment. SEAs can also consider providing state funding for additional educational options in addition to traditional district schools, including magnet schools, dual-

**Regardless of where they live, students should have access to advanced coursework and a variety of educational choices that meet their learning needs.**

immersion programs, and career academies. To ensure this choice is having a positive effect on equity, SEAs can examine indicators, such as career academy enrollment, to make sure these additional programs are not having unintended consequences for underserved students, such as tracking them toward low-paying career opportunities.

**c) Invest in high-quality distance and virtual learning options.** Regardless of where they live, students should have access to advanced coursework and a variety of educational choices that meet their learning needs. SEAs should ensure that online courses—electives or full courses of study—are rigorous, and make necessary investments in school-level technological infrastructure to guarantee students can take advantage of these options regardless of their circumstances.

**d) Subsidize the provision of transportation options for low-income families to access high-performing schools outside their community.** This could also include incentivizing high-performing districts to expand their bus routes to include enrolled students from outside district boundaries or equalizing funding for charter schools so that they can provide transportation to students and remove barriers to enrollment.<sup>38</sup>



**e) Consider examining admissions processes and criteria for specialized schools, including charter schools and magnet schools, to ensure that admissions requirements or assessments are not limiting opportunities for otherwise qualified students.** SEAs can examine where cultural bias or selection criteria may be inadvertently screening out qualified candidates, or where universal screening policies could expand access to students who may not otherwise be encouraged to apply to these schools.

**f) Support high-performing charter schools.** High-quality public charter schools have shown positive effects on student performance, particularly for low-income students and students of color.<sup>39</sup> SEAs can ensure that charter schools receive adequate funding to help students make progress, and encourage successful charters to replicate as feasible. To ensure these schools are having a positive impact on equity, SEAs can consider strategies, such as:

- o reviewing selection criteria to ensure they enable access for all students, including low-income, minorities, English learners, and students with disabilities;
- o examining patterns of charter school enrollment and assignment compared to traditional schools;

- o providing resources on how to design effective and equitable lottery admission systems that help foster diversity.
- g) Consider promoting diversity in schools by helping districts analyze student assignment and transportation patterns.** SEAs can develop guidance for LEAs on school siting and attendance zone issues; monitor and publicly report on patterns of school enrollment; provide guidance to LEAs on how to identify patterns and explore options such as changing catchment areas or reexamining choice policies; and provide guidance on political and logistical challenges.<sup>40</sup> Where LEAs are interested in pursuing this strategy, chiefs can be an important partner and publicly support those LEAs and the notion that diverse schools are beneficial for all students.
- h) Ensure all schools, including charters, are held accountable for providing high-quality education.** ESSA requires that state accountability provisions apply to charter schools in accordance with state charter school law. States can examine existing charter laws and chiefs can advocate for any changes necessary to ensure quality, such as establishing consistent public reporting requirements across all schools. Chiefs can also work with charter school authorizers to create and implement rigorous review and approval processes that foster innovation and expansion of quality programs and eliminate failing programs. Finally, chiefs, governors, and other state leaders can use their bully pulpit to call out authorizers that are failing to appropriately scrutinize applicants or shut down failing schools.

## CONCLUSION

Many state chiefs and SEAs are already addressing inequitable outcomes and opportunities for students. However, to truly build a system that eliminates systemic and historical barriers to students' success, there is much more work to be done. With the implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, states are poised to reassert their leadership in education policy and oversight. State chiefs have a renewed opportunity and responsibility to ensure that equity is at the core of the SEA's work and make the vision for educational success a reality.

*Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals... This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.*

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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(Endnotes)

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